

# THE DISTRICT DISPATCH

School News & Updates  
for the School District 197  
Community  
**Spring 2026**



*A look at math class at Mendota Elementary: first graders practice regrouping using a variety of strategies to build confidence in two-digit addition.*

## WHAT'S INSIDE

**Preparing Students for Life After High School**

**Class of 2026 Spotlights**

**New Sustainability Program with Dodge Nature Center**

**Family and Student Survey Results**

**Budget Update**

**And more!**

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The District Dispatch is a cost-effective way to share important updates and show how your tax dollars are used.

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## From the Superintendent

As we wrap up another school year, I'm reflecting on both the challenges we've faced and the strength of our community in response. For some of our families, these challenges have been especially difficult and uncertain, and I want you to know that you are valued here and that our schools are committed to being places of stability and belonging. In the midst of these moments, we've also seen the very best of who we are, with staff and community members stepping forward to support one another.

That spirit of connection is at the heart of this issue of District Dispatch. Our schools and community are deeply connected, and that partnership benefits us all. Together, we are preparing the next generation of community members—students who are ready to contribute and lead. In this issue, you'll read about a new after-school class helping middle school students prepare for their first job, a TriDistrict CAPS course in Natural Resources, Sustainability, and Food Systems in partnership with Dodge Nature Center, and the many ways we are working with local businesses to connect learning to real-world experiences.

As we continue this work, we are also navigating important financial decisions. The district is planning \$2.5 million in budget reductions as part of our ongoing effort to align expenses with revenue while protecting classroom instruction and student support.

Strong public schools create strong communities. I'm grateful for your continued partnership as we work together to support every student.

Peter Olson-Skog, Superintendent

# Points of Pride

Our students, staff, and schools continue to make us proud! Here are just a few recent highlights that showcase the incredible things happening across School District 197.



Two Rivers High School students **earned college credit** through the state Bilingual and Multilingual Seals test, with **45 students demonstrating proficiency in multiple languages**, including American Sign Language, Amharic, Arabic, French, and Spanish.



Middle school math teams had another strong season, with **Friendly Hills earning 1st place** and **Heritage E-STEM placing 2nd** in their division at the regional competition. Fun fact: Our schools have claimed the top two spots in the division every season since 2021!



Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School's **LEGO League team** earned the **Core Values Award**, recognizing their outstanding teamwork, collaboration, and positive team spirit throughout the competition season.



Friendly Hills Middle School's **Ambassadors program**, made up of 7th and 8th grade student leaders, helps new students feel welcomed from day one by guiding them through schedules, lockers, and the building, offering encouragement, and providing peer support throughout the year.



The Two Rivers Robotics Team, the **Lightning Turtles**, earned **1st place at regionals**, which qualified them for both the MSHSL State Tournament and the **FRC World Championship in Houston**.



Garlough Environmental Magnet School students **Penelope and Milke** advanced in the **Minnesota Zoo's Zooms STEM Design Challenge**, earning an invitation to present their project to zoo staff as part of the Sea Lion Enrichment competition.



Moreland Arts and Health Sciences Magnet School **fourth graders** brought the story of "Shrek the Musical Kids" to life, performing the production for a packed audience at the Two Rivers auditorium.

# Staff Highlights

We're proud to recognize the work of our educators and support the next generation of teachers. These highlights reflect the great work happening in our classrooms today and the steps we're taking to prepare future educators.

## Minnesota Teacher of the Year Candidates

**Shannon Dodson** and **Michelle Bannie** of Somerset Elementary have been named candidates for the Minnesota Teacher of the Year award. Michelle has spent her 13-year teaching career in District 197, while Shannon brings 30 years of experience and was recently named one of the top 11 finalists. Their recognition reflects the impactful work happening every day in our classrooms. **Congratulations, Shannon and Michelle!**



Michelle Bannie



Shannon Dodson

## 2025 Thrive With Us Scholarship Recipients

School District 197 is proud to announce the 2025 recipients of the Thrive With Us Scholarship, a “grow your own” program that supports Two Rivers High School seniors and district staff in pursuing careers in education. The program is funded through a Minnesota Department of Education grant.

Through Thrive With Us, participants receive tuition support, mentorship, and classroom experience—with a commitment to return and teach in School District 197 after graduation.

### Meet the 2025 Recipients



**Edy Halverson:**  
Two Rivers Class of 2025 graduate pursuing licensure in elementary and special education.



**Kris Herrera:**  
Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) paraprofessional working toward ECSE licensure.



**Stephanie Oliva:**  
English Learner paraprofessional at Two Rivers pursuing English as a Second Language licensure and supporting multilingual learners.



**Ronadel Ronquillo:**  
Moreland special education teacher earning an Academic and Behavioral Strategist license through the University of Minnesota.



**Tami Tate-Sheppard:**  
Two Rivers special education paraprofessional working toward becoming a licensed special education teacher.

**Congratulations to the 2025 Thrive With Us Scholarship recipients!**

# Class of 2026 Senior Spotlight

As the Class of 2026 prepares for graduation, we're highlighting Two Rivers seniors who have made a lasting impact through their achievements and contributions to the school community.



**KALIYAH  
BINNS**

*Attending University of Iowa, pursuing a B.A. in psychology*

**What is the most valuable thing you learned at Two Rivers?**

To spread love, no matter what your background is or what your relationship with someone is, just spread love and support everyone. You'd be surprised at how happy you'll make a stranger.



**RHYS  
WALSH**

*Attending University of Minnesota, plans to study Black maternal health*

**What will you miss most about your school community?**

I will miss my teachers the most. Every teacher I've had has impacted me in some way and has always been willing to help me. I can go back to a teacher I had in 9th grade or sophomore year, and each one is willing to help me with whatever I need.



**NICK  
SMOCK**

*Attending Branch Out Transition Program in School District 197*

**What is the most valuable thing you learned at Two Rivers?**

Learning independence. It is important to me to learn how to do things on my own as I learn to become an adult.



**LIAM  
MCINTYRE**

*Attending Belmont University in Nashville to study audio engineering*

**What will you miss most about your school community?**

How connected the school feels. Compared to a lot of schools, Two Rivers has a pretty small student body so the feeling that I can recognize most people in the hallways is going to be sorely missed.



**EVANGELINE  
FUENTES**

*Attending University of Tampa, majoring in International Business Management with a minor in Cybersecurity*

**What's one memory, tradition, or moment from Two Rivers that you'll never forget?**

The annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service that the Key Club hosts has been an amazing outlet for me to help make change within our community. With over 750 people attending last year's event, I am super excited to come back and visit the event in 2027 as an attendee instead of a board member and planner. This event really encapsulates the beauty of how connected our community is and highlights the big hearts of everyone in our district.



**LAMONT  
MICHAELS**

*Attending North Central University to study education and play basketball*

**Who is someone at Two Rivers or in the district you would like to thank, and why?**

I would like to thank all of my elementary teachers, Ms. Brignac, Ms. Bannie, and Ms. Duellman for being such great teachers to me at a young age that really shaped me into the person I have become today!

## Congratulations to the entire Class of 2026!

We're proud to celebrate your accomplishments and look forward to all that comes next.



# New Opportunities, Real-World Learning

We're always looking for meaningful ways to help students discover their passions and build real-world skills. This year, two new opportunities—a Science Olympiad team at Two Rivers and an after-school program for middle schoolers preparing for their first job—are doing just that. Read more below.

## A Strong First Year for the Two Rivers Science Olympiad Team

From hovercrafts to forensics, Two Rivers students are putting science into action.

Launched this year by teacher Laura Gislason, the Science Olympiad team allows students to explore a wide range of STEM fields through competitions and team-based events. Students compete in everything from astronomy to engineering builds, testing their knowledge, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Despite being a small, first-year team, they placed third at regionals and advanced to the state tournament.

### Students say the team experience is just as meaningful as the competition itself.

"My favorite part is the late nights preparing for competitions. We hang out, get pizza, and work together. Depending on the event, we're building things, testing them, breaking them, and rebuilding." - Audrey Macumber, 11th grade

For many students, the program has sparked new interest in career fields such as engineering, veterinary medicine, and technology.



Photos by Studio Mendota Photography



## Helping Students Prepare for Their First Job

What does it take to land your first job at 14? This spring, School District 197 is helping middle school students find out through a new after-school class, *Hired! Landing a Job at 14+ Years*.

Developed through a partnership between TriDistrict Community Education and the South Robert Street Business Association, the five-session course is taught by local business leader Frank Hanzal. Students build practical skills for entering the workforce, including communication, interviewing, and workplace expectations.

The program also features guest speakers from the local business community. During a recent session, Miriam LeTexier Mandujano, co-owner of a local Culver's and a District 197 alum (check out her alum feature on page 8!), shared her journey from starting her first job at age 14.

Through experiences like these, students gain practical skills they can use right away as they begin applying for jobs.

# Preparing Students for Life Beyond High School with Career and Technical Education

For Two Rivers senior Lorenzo Blanco, learning doesn't just happen in a classroom—it happens outside, working with animals at Dodge Nature Center as he prepares for a future in veterinary medicine.

**That's the impact of Career and Technical Education (CTE).** Across School District 197, students gain real-world experience through hands-on learning, internships, and partnerships with local businesses—helping them explore interests and build skills for what comes next.

At Two Rivers High School, **students can choose from more than 50 courses** that offer opportunities to earn college credit, industry-recognized certifications, internships, and work-based learning.



## CTE in School District 197

Students begin to discover career interests in elementary school, with electives and learning opportunities that continue to expand throughout middle and high school. Through programs at Two Rivers High School and TriDistrict CAPS, students work alongside industry professionals and gain experience in fields such as culinary, child development, healthcare, transportation and trades, business, natural resources, and technology.

### Students across the district are already putting their learning into action:

- TriDistrict CAPS Transportation and Trades students, in partnership with industry professionals, installed a sidewalk extension at Two Rivers.
- Student Help Desk students provide IT support to students and staff—repairing devices and troubleshooting issues while earning industry certifications.
- Work-Based Learning students are gaining experience during the school day through internships at local businesses.
- TriDistrict CAPS Natural Resources students are building solar panels while learning about alternative energy and sustainability practices.



## Expanding Opportunities



Located just inside the Two Rivers entrance, the new Career Readiness Center serves as a hub for work-based learning and career development. Made possible in part by a Youth Skills Training Grant from the Department of Labor, the center connects students to hands-on experiences while also offering support with resume writing, interview preparation, and career exploration. A key focus of the program is expanding access for all students—including those with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)—by increasing opportunities for career exploration and paid work experience in high-demand fields. As it continues to grow, the Career Readiness Center is designed to be a space where any student can access guidance and build skills for life beyond high school.



## DID YOU KNOW?

According to the Minnesota Department of Education,

**92%**

of Minnesota students who take multiple CTE courses graduate high school

**65%**

continue their education after high school

**86%**

are employed shortly after completing their program

# Where Learning Comes to Life: CTE in Action

## At Dodge Nature Center in West St. Paul, learning looks a little different.

Students are outside—working with animals and getting their hands dirty. It's here that Career and Technical Education (CTE) comes to life for Two Rivers seniors, including Lorenzo Blanco and Mackenzie Woods, as they connect their classroom learning to real-world experiences.

Through the new TriDistrict CAPS Natural Resources, Sustainability, and Food Systems course, students step into an immersive environment where science, sustainability, and agriculture intersect.

## Bringing Curiosity Back into Learning

Instead of traditional classroom routines, students spend their time at Dodge harvesting crops, working in gardens, and learning how natural ecosystems function.

"It brings curiosity back into learning," shared instructor Jesse Rock. "When students are outside and engaged, they ask more questions and make deeper connections."

## Real-World Experience

In the second semester, students extend their learning through internships and service projects with local partners. Partnerships with organizations such as Great River Greening and Freshwater Society help connect students to meaningful work in their communities.

**This kind of learning is already helping students connect their interests to future career paths.**

Mackenzie, a Two Rivers senior who plans to study environmental science at Luther College, is developing skills that align with her interests through her CAPS internship with Great River Greening.

Lorenzo, a Two Rivers senior, first discovered his love for working outdoors and with animals through his time at Dodge Nature Center as an elementary student at Garlough Environmental Magnet School. He continued his journey at Heritage STEM Magnet School and is now coming full circle with a senior-year internship back at Dodge through the new CAPS course. He hopes to be a veterinarian.

"I always liked working outside, and with the experience I already had in elementary school, I knew it would be the right fit," Lorenzo shared. "I want to be a vet when I'm older, so having a chance to work outside and with animals, but also just nature in general, I thought it would be a good opportunity to get some more knowledge and experience."



**Want to learn more about the TriDistrict CAPS program?**

Click on the QR code to learn more.



**It brings curiosity back into learning. When students are outside and engaged, they ask more questions and make deeper connections."**

Jesse Rock, Instructor

# Alum Spotlight

## Miriam LeTexier Mandujano

Miriam LeTexier Mandujano's story is a full-circle moment rooted right here in West St. Paul. She started her first job at age 14 at the Culver's on Robert Street, and today, she co-owns a Culver's while continuing to spend much of her time at the West St. Paul location, helping lead day-to-day operations alongside the general manager.

A graduate of Henry Sibley High School (now Two Rivers High School), Miriam has built a career in the food service industry centered on people, growth, and community—values that continue to guide her work every day.



### What schools did you attend in School District 197?

I attended Friendly Hills Middle School and then Henry Sibley, graduating in 2010. I now live in the community and have two children in the district.

### What experiences or classes had the biggest impact on you?

I always loved school and had great relationships with my teachers, but my ESL (English as a Second Language) experience really stood out. The ESL community is very close-knit and supportive, and that made a big difference for me.

### Was there a teacher or staff member who influenced you?

Mr. Eric Vernon, an ELL teacher at Two Rivers, had a lasting impact on me. Even after I no longer needed ESL support, he continued to check in and be a mentor. That meant a lot.

### What has your path looked like since graduation?

I started working at the Culver's in West St. Paul when I was 14, and that experience really shaped my path. I attended Inver Hills Community College for accounting, but realized I wanted to stay in the food industry. It's a people business, and I love being part of that. Today, I'm a Culver's co-owner/operator and help lead the West St. Paul location alongside our general manager.

### What do you enjoy most about your work?

Helping people grow. I enjoy doing for others what was done for me. I currently mentor several employees as they work toward leadership roles. Supporting their development and seeing them succeed is the most rewarding part of my job.

### What advice would you give to current students?

Focus on growth so you can be better for the people around you. It's also okay to change your mind and try new things—just make sure you're always kind to others.

Miriam remains deeply connected to the community—supporting local schools through Culver's Give Back nights and creating employment opportunities for youth. Her journey reflects the meaningful ways our graduates continue to contribute to and strengthen our community.





# Support Rooted in Community: The Mariposa Scholarship

**The Mariposa Scholarship is helping open doors for students in School District 197—providing financial support and encouragement as they begin planning for life after high school.**

Funded by the Mary Kay and Ron Nelson Charitable Fund, the scholarship was created in 2022 to give back to a community the Nelson family has called home for more than 50 years and to support students in pursuing post-secondary education. The scholarship is open to students who have attended Garlough Environmental Magnet School, Heritage E-STEM Magnet School, and Two Rivers High School—the three schools that Mary Kay and Ron’s daughters Kristy DePaulis and Becky Jacobson attended.

The name “Mariposa,” which means butterfly in Spanish, came from a family conversation. One grandchild suggested “butterfly,” a favorite of their late grandmother, and another proposed using the Spanish word to reflect the community’s cultural diversity.

The Nelson family remains closely involved, with Kristy and Becky helping lead the effort and connect with students. Each year, five juniors are selected, and each is awarded \$20,000. The 2025 nominees include Leyda Alvarenga Mejia, Rory Shuler, Margaret Smith, Regis Jones, and Kaz Resendiz Berg—students with goals ranging from pediatric nursing and engineering to athletics and the arts.

**“This is an amazing opportunity for our students, and we are so grateful for the investment this scholarship makes in our scholars. It is inspiring to see the impact of this scholarship as our students plan for their future.”**

Dr. Jessica Cabak, Principal

## District Survey Shows Strong Relationships

Each year, School District 197 gathers feedback from students, families, and staff to understand what’s working well and where we can grow.

This year’s results reinforce what makes our district strong: **relationships matter.** Nearly all families who completed the survey report their child feels safe at school, and around 90% of students and staff report strong, positive relationships across the district.

While this foundation is strong, we remain focused on continuous improvement—specifically, by diving deeper into students’ perceptions of classroom engagement and ensuring a high-quality experience across all classrooms.

We are proud of these results and grateful for our community’s partnership in supporting every student.



Scan the QR code to learn more.

**“There is always a teacher I can go to if I need help.”**

- School District 197 Student

### BY THE NUMBERS

**~97% Feel Safe:**

Families report their child feels safe at school

**~90% Positive Relationships:**

Students and staff report strong, positive relationships

**~90% Welcoming Environment:**

Families report feeling welcomed by our schools

# School District 197 Budget Update

School District 197 is planning to **cut \$2.5 million in expenses (2-3% of the budget)** for the 2026-27 school year. This is in addition to **\$700,000 already reduced this school year** as part of our multi-year cost-containment plan.

Like nearly all districts across the metro area, we are facing a **structural budget gap**. The Association of Metropolitan School Districts estimates a combined **\$223 million shortfall** across 47 member districts for the 2026-27 school year.

## Why is this happening?

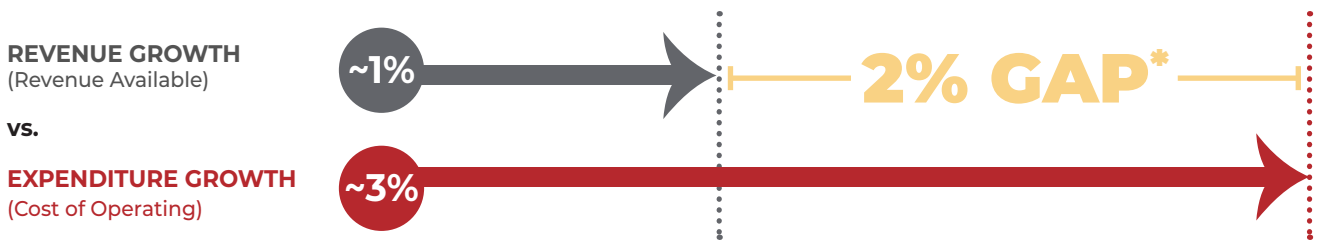
Costs continue to rise faster than revenue, driven by:

Inflation and rising operational expenses	Unfunded and underfunded state mandates	Rising special education costs and declining reimbursement, with an additional \$250 million in statewide cuts planned for 2028
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In short, **the cost to educate students is increasing while funding is not keeping pace**. School District 197, like other districts, must make budget adjustments to ensure long-term financial sustainability while continuing to support student success.

## What is a structural budget gap?

Even with reductions in place, the district faces a persistent structural challenge: *the cost of operating schools grows faster than the revenue available to fund them.*



\*The gap between these two rates compounds over time. In our budget, a 2% gap equals about \$2 million—roughly \$2 million more in costs than revenue each year.

## What does this mean for our district?

Because nearly 90% of our budget goes to staffing, some position cuts will be necessary. Our approach focuses on:

- **Protecting classroom instruction and student support**
- **Maintaining class size parameters**, which are planned to remain unchanged next year, as they have for nearly 20 years

## Looking Ahead: Capital Levy Consideration

In addition to budget cuts and continued advocacy at the state level, the district is also **considering a capital tax levy this fall**. This would help restore our fund balance—our district's savings account—and reduce the need for deeper staffing cuts in the future.

We are grateful for our community's continued support as we work to maintain strong programs for students while planning responsibly for the future.

Scan the QR code for more information on our budget.



## Want to Talk Budget with the Superintendent?

Join us for our last Coffee with the Superintendent of the year on Monday, May 18, from 8:00-9:30 am at the District Office (connected to Two Rivers High School).

**Monday, May 18**  
8am-9:30am  
District Office

# Update from the Board Chair

## ***Greetings from your School District 197 Board Chair!***

I'm so grateful to serve this community. I want to take a moment to express my gratitude and say thank you.

Thank you to our incredible staff and dedicated community members who have consistently stepped up in support of our students and families throughout this year. Your care, commitment, and generosity have been deeply felt by our community, ensuring continuity of learning and providing essential support where it's needed most.

Thank you to our Student School Board Representatives, Evangeline and Rhys, for their exceptional service this year. Their active participation and guidance have only highlighted for the Board why we are committed to including student voice in our decisions and work. We wish them continued success in their endeavors after graduation.

Speaking of graduation, congratulations and thank you to our Class of 2026! We are grateful that you are part of our Warrior community, and we look forward to celebrating with you on May 31! Congratulations also to all staff and teachers retiring this year—I am so grateful for your service.

Thank you to the community, as we continue to plan for long-term fiscal responsibility. We are committed to prioritizing our students, their classroom experience, and their well-being. Ongoing feedback from our community regarding budget priorities is invaluable and continues to shape our strategic financial decisions.

Thank you for a great year, and I wish all of our students, families, and staff a safe, restful, and wonderful summer!

Sarah Larsen, proud School District 197 School Board Chair



## **What Is the School Board? A Fourth Grader Finds Out**

**Pilot Knob STEM Magnet School fourth grader Nathan Yosef wrote an article about the school board in the latest edition of PK Press, the school newsletter written and created by fourth graders in the gifted and talented program at Pilot Knob. Read Nathan's write-up below.**



### **What Is the School Board and What Do They Do?**

Hello! Are you wondering what the school board is? Well, you're in luck, because I'm gonna find out! I was wondering what the school board was because, well, everybody talks about them, but we don't know who they are. So, I decided to find out. I asked Ms. Boe if she knew a school board member. She said she knew a really nice member that would love to come. So Mr. Vaupel (a school board member) came to the school and talked to me.

"The school board exists because we help run the district," he said. "The district is independent. That means it is run by the community. So, they elect 7 people to be on the board. Like a navigator on a ship." He has a kid in 8th grade and a kid in 7th grade. They both go to Friendly Hills Middle School. This taught me what the school board is and that members are just ordinary people that just want to serve the community.



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# Together we CARE. Together we THRIVE.



Our team of cultural liaisons, translators, and interpreters plays a vital role in our school community, and we are deeply grateful for the care, connection, and expertise they bring to their work each day. While their role is always essential, this year they stepped in to support students and families in even more ways—meeting needs with heart and a deep commitment to our community.

Their impact reaches across every school. They are trusted partners in helping families feel welcomed, supported, and connected.

**Together, we want all families to know: you belong here, and we are grateful you are a part of our community.**